

# The Impact of Public Opinion Research On Our Society

BY HAROLD D. LASSWELL

While recent public opinion researchers have added few theoretical concepts which were not available at the time of the French Revolution, they have devised a set of instruments, the social impact of which has been substantial. Survey techniques can be, and have been, used at all stages of the decision-making process, and at all levels. They are a major contribution to self-observation, which in turn is an essential requirement for the fuller realization of the values of our democracy.

Harold D. Lasswell has baffled, enlightened, and inspired many of his colleagues, no less than several generations of students. As a political scientist, he has contrived to lead important advances in many more or less related fields, among them opinion research, without becoming a prisoner in any one area. His current activities as Professor of Law and Political Science at Yale may confidently be expected to result in a more socially sophisticated legal profession.

THE MAJOR SOCIAL impact of public opinion research has resulted from the contribution it has made to the study and practice of decision making and execution in the modern world. Its effect on decision making in the future is likely to be even greater. In this discussion, I shall be most immediately concerned with the impact of opinion studies on political research, and on the practical conduct of those institutions in which basic decisions are made.

At the level of fundamental theory nothing has been added. The basic concepts of the "public" and "opinion" were as adequate in the leading scholarly writings of the nineteenth century as they have been in the twentieth. It would not be far wide of the mark to say the same for the eighteenth century, or more generally for every period in which urban development has fostered the appearance of a social order possessing enough mobility to reveal the fundamental characteristics of a public.<sup>1</sup>

Differences of terminology are innumerable and indeed inescapable from period to period, culture to culture, and specialty to specialty (to say nothing of from person to person). Since Bentham, however, it has been unnecessary for any well-instructed social scientist to fall into the semantic trap of confusing differences in vocabulary with likenesses or differences of conception. In particular, the literature of autopsy on the mind-shaking phenomenon called the French Revolution employed all the conceptual apparatus needed

<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand Tönnies and Wilhelm Bauer remain especially useful guides to the history of theory and fact. In all probability several variants of recent communication theory will make basic contributions. On the pitfalls, however, see Herbert Goldhamer's review article in *World Politics* (6) (1954) 394-405.

to formulate "public" in contrast to "private" or "ruling opinion"; or to distinguish collective opinion from patterns either more or less enduring (e.g., "ideology," "folklore," "nationalism," "crowd mind," "attention group").

To recognize that fundamental theory has been unaffected does not carry the implication that the work of recent decades in the study of public opinion has been of little or no importance for the advancement of learning or for the practice of government. The salient point is that intellectual advances have occurred at a lower level of theory. An important set of innovations has been *instrumental*. New instruments of data gathering and processing have been invented for the conduct of interviews and the examination of communication *content* and *effect*. These instrumental developments have made it practicable to build a network of new *institutions* for the observation of the political process. Organizations engaged in the measurement of public opinion on political issues may be said to belong to this category of institutions.

The intellectual impact of new instruments and institutions is only beginning to be felt. The scholarly world is coming to recognize that an unprecedented opportunity is at hand *to relate fundamental categories explicitly and continuously* to the flow of public opinion in the decision process at every level—international, national, regional, and local.

I spoke of "unprecedented" opportunity. While this is strictly true, the opportunity is novel only in reference to such fields of scholarly effort as political science, jurisprudence, international relations, sociology, social psychology, and social anthropology. A process of adjustment is called for that has already taken place on a considerable scale in the study of economic institutions. A few years ago, economists were still gravely handicapped in relating theory to current and recent trends by the paucity of pertinent data reported by agencies of economic intelligence. At the same time they were laboring under the handicap of disagreement among economists about the proper role of the profession. I refer to the unwillingness of some theorists to build a bridge between categories of economic analysis and the actual flow of production, distribution, saving, investment and consumption.<sup>2</sup>

In reference to every value-institution process in society it is not unusual for scholars to establish a division of function between those who *explain* and those who *propose*. Among economists, some significant personalities were less concerned with explaining the flow of economic events in detail than in lecturing the world—whether students or men of action—about how rational choices ought to be made. *If* rational choices were made, economies would operate rationally; *if* men were irrational, it served no purpose—said the admonishers—to make exhaustive studies of the consequences of irrationality. The economists who felt differently and who busied themselves with improv-

<sup>2</sup> See the reservations on "institutional" and "flow" studies expressed by Frank Hyneman Knight in his various essays.

ing mathematical and statistical methods, and with perfecting sources of economic intelligence, were often the butt of adverse comment within the profession.

All this has a familiar contemporary ring in the ears of those political scientists and other scholars who have preoccupied themselves with new instruments, institutions, and theories relating to public opinion. Instead of accepting such activities as part of a new development in the division of labor, leading figures in the scholarly world have not infrequently felt that the established order was in danger. In part, the din within the professions has been sustained by the vestal virgins who uphold historic truth, or "truth by definition," or who consider truth as a series of propositions subject to dignified reconsideration in the glow of what previous vestals have had to say.

Here, I propose to give brief consideration to past and potential contributions of public opinion research to the five operations involved in solving a decision problem: the clarification of value goals; the reporting of current and historic trends; the analysis of determining factors; the projection of future developments; and the invention and evaluation of policy alternatives designed to yield the largest net return when all value goals are considered.

#### CLARIFYING GOAL VALUES

Opinion research has produced a body of experts who are continually asking decision makers to specify more precisely what they want to accomplish. In regard to an allied country, for example, is it the aim of policy to establish "friendly attitudes" toward America throughout the population; or are the objectives more limited in time and target? In the latter case it may be possible to clarify a family of objectives, such as winning over the articulately anti-American sectors of the press, the national legislature, the trade union leadership, the intellectuals of the principal universities, and so on. Practical and theoretical work relating to public opinion has never been oblivious to the contextual setting in which opinions of varying degrees of agreement, elaboration and intensity occur; even a cursory examination of the manuals of the College of Sacred Propaganda (dating back to the counter-Reformation) confirms this point. However, the use of sampling methods in recent times has made more obvious the doubtful utility of vaguely formulated goals.

One variant of the goal problem concerns the research worker himself. Most opinion researchers have no code to guide them in drawing a line between what they will and will not do for a client, an employer, or a superior in a government, church, or other hierarchy. Unlike a lawyer or physician, an opinion surveyor lacks tradition. He often comes from an academic discipline the responsibilities of which, as they relate to public affairs, are undefined. It happens that much of the research done on some phases of public opinion has been carried on by government, either directly or by contract to

private agencies. This has posed problems of secrecy and disclosure, and of the legitimacy of acquiescing in various investigative requirements laid down in the name of national security. It is gratifying to see that individuals and associations concerned with public opinion research have made progress in clarifying the principles of a code of professional practice.

Another question relating to the clarification of goals concerns the choice of topic to be pursued by individual scholars or by agencies. To what extent do scholars take the initiative? To what extent are they opportunistic in search of quick results and immediate support? There are many fundamental problems connected with the structure of modern societies that can be illuminated by the methods of opinion research. It may be possible to demonstrate that a certain level of public controversy is necessary to maintain effective democratic controls in an organization. On the other hand, at some phases of governmental action controversy may destroy values, as, for example, when litigation is conducted by adversarial procedures. It is not impractical to investigate the extent to which public opinion in our society has been operating as a means of catharsis rather than as a modifier of institutions. Under what circumstances does public opinion perform the function for society that neurotic or even psychotic symptoms perform for individuals? For example, do they rigidify modes of perception to such a degree that the community fails to recognize new developments that require new learning? Does public opinion usually reflect tensions among public figures rather than among larger circles? These questions are cited as reminders of issues amenable to attack by researches willing to pursue basic matters.

#### TREND AND FACTOR KNOWLEDGE

Problem solving not only calls for the clarification of goal values, but draws upon research to describe the current distribution of relevant facts, to put the present in the context of changing trends, and to analyze interdependencies among significant factors. It is standard practice for an increasing number of official and unofficial organizations to employ systematic opinion studies to provide relevant trend and factor knowledge.

Public opinion research is needed for both intelligence and appraisal purposes. The intelligence function in the decision process is served by news and comment that has a bearing on new legislative or administrative action. The appraisal function is more restricted: it reports upon the effect of previous policy on events. Every thoughtful decision maker is aware of the importance of knowing in advance where trouble is likely to "break cover." And it is important to appraise the influence of past policy and administration on the situation. Hence, public opinion is surveyed in the hope of discerning undercurrents of hostility. Adverse opinion about military bases, for example, cannot fail to have implications for top security policy.

The interpretation of distributions and trends poses the usual methodological questions about the validity of comparisons. Public opinion specialists have been learning the hard way about the difficulties of "the comparative method" as applied to various parts of Mexico, or to France, Turkey, India, and Japan. In general this new experience has confirmed the viewpoint of Malinowski, Radcliffe-Brown and other social anthropologists of the "functionalist" school, who insist upon the importance of interpreting the relation of any two details by taking the entire context into account. An equivalent point was made by structuralists and psychoanalysts, and by "realistic" students of contemporary jurisprudence. The policy import of cross-cultural, cross-class and cross-interest research is already great: often it is possible to demonstrate the utter futility of campaigns which failed to differentiate sufficiently among audience targets, channels, and contents.

Modern survey institutions offer students of public opinion and the social process *the possibility of keeping the fundamental propositions of social science continuously related to, and open to correction by, the current stream of events*. This is far from the traditional conception of scholarly inquiry, which assumed that theoretical models of the social process would grow over the ages like coral reefs. Today, we are about to have at our disposal machines for the processing of data which will enable us continuously to verify all important equations of social interaction by checking them against the current stream of data about contemporary events on a world scale, or within selected subdivisions of the world.

Not the least implication of this development is that the traditional distinction between "pure" and "applied" research will cease to apply to "analytic" as against "trend" research. No theoretical system can be sufficiently pure to evade the challenge of accounting for the shape of any pattern through any period whatever in any context whatever. The only way to describe a context fully is to observe contemporary events in detail.

There are other implications for scholarship. Bureaus of research on opinion, sometimes regarded as pimples on the face of Alma Mater, will be accepted for what they are; namely, indispensable social observatories and laboratories for all the political and social sciences. They are centers of self-knowledge, as the past moves into the future. Historians will extend the sequence of events backward, and test their explanations by employing the same body of theory that is used in accounting for contemporary processes.<sup>8</sup>

#### THE INVENTION AND PROJECTION OF ALTERNATIVES

Policy decisions always depend upon an expectation map of the future.

<sup>8</sup> The research initiated by Thomas C. Cochran of the University of Pennsylvania is especially promising in this connection.

Research on public opinion has begun to affect the future expectations of persons connected with every phase of the decision process. Opinion surveys have influenced the judgment of military planners, civil administrators, courts, chief executives, and legislators. Pressure group strategy, and the strategy of political parties, has been affected by research results.

Since, in the United States, we are living within a society with democratic ideal values, the most important question to be raised about public opinion research is whether it is likely to strengthen or weaken the institutions of popular government, or to encourage peace or war. It is impossible to speak with assurance about past trends or future developments affecting democracy and security. However, it is possible to specify some dimensions of the problem, and to sharpen issues for investigation.

Are democracy and individual freedom weakened or strengthened when survey methods disclose the wide discrepancies that exist between the doctrines and legal prescriptions of our constitutional system and the state of opinion about civil liberties? Are democratic and humane institutions built up or undermined when research shows the intensity with which so many people advocate punitive measures rather than measures of rehabilitation when dealing with criminal offenders? Is popular government made stronger or weaker when the public's lack of information on major public matters is revealed? Do we improve or weaken our position in world affairs by constantly reporting the suspicions and animosities that divide the Free World?

The standard answer to any such misgivings is that democracy requires an informed public and that it is peculiarly important to inform the public about itself. But this is a dialectical answer and not a descriptive one. What does research show about the effect of research reports upon the image of the public that is current among leaders, sub-leaders and rank and file of the public in this country and elsewhere? As the image of the public is modified, if it is, do we find that devoted adherents of the democratic creed lose confidence and work less vigorously on behalf of popular institutions? Or, on the contrary, are they stirred to action in programs designed to fortify democracy?

A commonplace among scholars is that any ideological system, sacred or secular, can be (and probably has been or will be) invoked on behalf of specific policies that, from the standpoint of the relatively detached observer, appear to contradict its basic principles. When we examine the relationship between public opinion and ideology, therefore, and discover that discrepancies exist, we are adding nothing to our basic knowledge of society. But when we devise instruments and institutions that can be used to keep us informed about the magnitude of these trends, and the factors affecting them, we do in fact add something new. In the history of man, self-observatories simultaneously serve the end of policy and science to an unprecedented degree. In the last two decades we have gone rapidly ahead in this regard at least.